

CHAPTER XXIII

A DAWN OF RAIN

That crash of the closing door did not awake Beatrice only; it awoke both Elizabeth and Mr. Granger. Elizabeth sat up in bed straining her eyes through the gloom to see what had happened. They fell on Beatrice's bed--surely--surely----

Elizabeth slipped up, cat-like she crept across the room and felt with her hand at the bed. Beatrice was not there. She sprang to the blind and drew it, letting in such light as there was, and by it searched the room. She spoke: "Beatrice, where are you?"

No answer.

"Ah--h," said Elizabeth aloud; "I understand. At last--at last!"

What should she do? Should she go and call her father and put them to an open shame? No. Beatrice must come back some time. The knowledge was enough; she wanted the knowledge to use if necessary. She did not wish to ruin her sister unless in self-defence, or rather, for the cause of self-advancement. Still less did she wish to injure Geoffrey, against whom she had no grudge. So she peeped along the passage, then returning, crept back to her bed like a snake into a hole and watched.

Mr. Granger, hearing the crash, thought that the front door had blown open. Rising, he lit a candle and went to see.

But of all this Geoffrey knew nothing, and Beatrice naturally less than nothing.

She lay senseless in his arms, her head rested on his shoulder, her heavy hair streamed down his side almost to his knee. He lifted her, touched her on the forehead with his lips and laid her on the bed. What was to be done? Bring her back to life? No, he dared not--not here. While she lay thus her helplessness protected her; but if once more she was a living, loving woman here and so--oh, how should they escape? He dared not touch her or look towards her--till he had made up his mind. It was soon done. Here she must not bide, and since of herself she could not go, why he must take her now, this moment! However far Geoffrey fell short of virtue's stricter standard, let this always be remembered in his favour.

He opened the door, and as he did so, thought that he heard some one stirring in the house. And so he did; it was Mr. Granger in the sitting-room. Hearing no more, Geoffrey concluded that it was the wind, and turning, groped his way to the bed where Beatrice lay as still as death. For one moment a horrible fear struck him that she might be dead. He had heard of cases of somnambulists who, on being startled from their unnatural sleep, only woke to die. It might be so with her. Hurriedly he

placed his hand upon her breast. Yes, her heart stirred--faintly indeed, but still it stirred. She had only swooned. Then he set his teeth, and placing his arms about her, lifted her as though she were a babe. Beatrice was no slip of a girl, but a well-grown woman of full size. He never felt her weight; it seemed nothing to him. Stealthily as one bent on midnight murder, he stepped with her to the door and through it into the passage. Then supporting her with one arm, he closed the door with his left hand. Stealthily in the gloom he passed along the corridor, his bare feet making no noise upon the boarded floor, till he reached the bisecting passage leading from the sitting-rooms.

He glanced up it apprehensively, and what he saw froze the blood in his veins, for there coming down it, not eight paces from him, was Mr. Granger, holding a candle in his hand. What could be done? To get back to his room was impossible--to reach that of Beatrice was also impossible. With an effort he collected his thoughts, and like a flash of light it passed into his mind that the empty room was not two paces from him. A stride and he had reached it. Oh, where was the handle? and oh, if the room should be locked! By a merciful chance it was not. He stepped through the door, knocking Beatrice's feet against the framework as he did so, closed it--to shut it he had no time--and stood gasping behind it.

The gleam of light drew nearer. Merciful powers! he had been seen--the old man was coming in. What could he say? Tell the truth, that was all; but who would believe such a story? why, it was one that he should

scarcely care to advance in a court of law. Could he expect a father to believe it--a father finding a man crouched like a thief behind a door at the dead of night with his lovely daughter senseless in his arms? He had already thought of going straight to Mr. Granger, but had abandoned the idea as hopeless. Who would believe this tale of sleep-walking? For the first time in his life Geoffrey felt terribly afraid, both for Beatrice and himself; the hair rose on his head, his heart stood still, and a cold perspiration started on to his face.

"It's very odd," he heard the old man mutter to himself; "I could almost swear that I saw something white go into that room. Where's the handle? If I believed in ghosts--hullo! my candle has blown out! I must go and hunt for a match. Don't quite like going in there without a light."

For the moment they were saved. The fierce draught rushing through the open crack of the door from the ill-fitting window had extinguished the candle.

Geoffrey waited a few seconds to allow Mr. Granger to reach his room, and then once more started on his awful journey. He passed out of the room in safety; happily Beatrice showed no signs of recovery. A few quick steps and he was at her own door. And now a new terror seized him. What if Elizabeth was also walking the house or even awake? He thought of putting Beatrice down at the door and leaving her there, but abandoned the idea. To begin with, her father might see her, and then how could her presence be accounted for? or if he did not, she would

certainly suffer ill effects from the cold. No, he must risk it, and at once, though he would rather have faced a battery of guns. The door fortunately was ajar. Geoffrey opened it with his foot, entered, and with his foot pushed it to again. Suddenly he remembered that he had never been in the room, and did not know which bed belonged to Beatrice. He walked to the nearest; a deep-drawn breath told him that it was the wrong one. Drawing some faint consolation from the fact that Elizabeth was evidently asleep, he groped his way to the second bed through the deep twilight of the room. The clothes were thrown back. He laid Beatrice down and threw them over her. Then he fled.

As he reached the door he saw Mr. Granger's light disappear into his own room and heard his door close. After that it seemed to him that he took but two steps and was in his own place.

He burst out laughing; there was as much hysteria in the laugh as a man gives way to. His nerves were shattered by struggle, love and fear, and sought relief in ghastly merriment. Somehow the whole scene reminded him of one in a comic opera. There was a ludicrous side to it. Supposing that the political opponents, who already hated him so bitterly, could have seen him slinking from door to door at midnight with an unconscious lady in his arms--what would they have said?

He ceased laughing; the fit passed--indeed it was no laughing matter. Then he thought of the first night of their strange communion, that night before he had returned to London. The seed sown in that hour had

blossomed and borne fruit indeed. Who would have dreamed it possible that he should thus have drawn Beatrice to him? Well, he ought to have known. If it was possible that the words which floated through her mind could arise in his as they had done upon that night, what was not possible? And were there not other words, written by the same master-hand, which told of such things as these:

"Now--now,' the door is heard;
Hark, the stairs! and near--
Nearer--and here--
'Now!' and at call the third,
She enters without a word.

Like the doors of a casket shrine,
See on either side,
Her two arms divide
Till the heart betwixt makes sign,
'Take me, for I am thine.'

First, I will pray. Do Thou
That ownest the soul,
Yet wilt grant control
To another, nor disallow
For a time, restrain me now!"

Did they not run thus? Oh, he should have known! This he could plead,

and this only--that control had been granted to him.

But how would Beatrice fare? Would she come to herself safely? He thought so, it was only a fainting fit. But when she did recover, what would she do? Nothing rash, he prayed. And what could be the end of it all? Who might say? How fortunate that the sister had been so sound asleep. Somehow he did not trust Elizabeth--he feared her.

Well might Geoffrey fear her! Elizabeth's sleep was that of a weasel. She too was laughing at this very moment, laughing, not loud but long--the laugh of one who wins.

She had seen him enter, his burden in his arms; saw him come with it to her own bedside, and had breathed heavily to warn him of his mistake. She had watched him put Beatrice on her bed, and heard him sigh and turn away; nothing had escaped her. As soon as he was gone, she had risen and crept up to Beatrice, and finding that she was only in a faint had left her to recover, knowing her to be in no danger. Elizabeth was not a nervous person. Then she had listened till at length a deep sigh told her of the return of her sister's consciousness. After this there was a pause, till presently Beatrice's long soft breaths showed that she had glided from swoon to sleep.

The slow night wore away, and at length the cold dawn crept through the window. Elizabeth still watching, for she was not willing to lose a single scene of a drama so entrancing in itself and so important to her

interests, saw her sister suddenly sit up in bed and press her hands to her forehead, as though she was striving to recall a dream. Then Beatrice covered her eyes with her hands and groaned heavily. Next she looked at her watch, rose, drank a glass of water, and dressed herself, even to the putting on of an old grey waterproof with a hood to it, for it was wet outside.

"She is going to meet her lover," thought Elizabeth. "I wish I could be there to see that too, but I have seen enough."

She yawned and appeared to wake. "What, Beatrice, going out already in this pouring rain?" she said, with feigned astonishment.

"Yes, I have slept badly and I want to get some air," answered Beatrice, starting and colouring; "I suppose that it was the storm."

"Has there been a storm?" said Elizabeth, yawning again. "I heard nothing of it--but then so many things happen when one is asleep of which one knows nothing at the time," she added sleepily, like one speaking at random. "Mind that you are back to say good-bye to Mr. Bingham; he goes by the early train, you know--but perhaps you will see him out walking," and appearing to wake up thoroughly, she raised herself in bed and gave her sister one piercing look.

Beatrice made no answer; that look sent a thrill of fear through her.

Oh; what had happened! Or was it all a dream? Had she dreamed that she

stood face to face with Geoffrey in his room before a great darkness struck her and overwhelmed her? Or was it an awful truth, and if a truth, how came she here again? She went to the pantry, found a morsel of bread and ate it, for faintness still pursued her. Then feeling better, she left the house and set her face towards the beach.

It was a dreary morning. The great wind had passed; now it only blew in little gusts heavy with driving rain. The sea was sullen and grey and grand. It beat in thunder on the shore and flew over the sunken rocks in columns of leaden spray. The whole earth seemed one desolation, and all its grief was centred in this woman's broken heart.

Geoffrey, too, was up. How he had passed the remainder of that tragic night we need not inquire--not too happily we may be sure. He heard the front door close behind Beatrice, and followed out into the rain.

On the beach, some half of a mile away, he found her gazing at the sea, a great white gull wheeling about her head. No word of greeting passed between them; they only grasped each other's hands and looked into each other's hollow eyes.

"Come under the shelter of the cliff," he said, and she came. She stood beneath the cliff, her head bowed low, her face hidden by the hood, and spoke.

"Tell me what has happened," she said; "I have dreamed something, a worse dream than any that have gone before--tell me if it is true. Do not spare me."

And Geoffrey told her all.

When he had finished she spoke again.

"By what shall I swear," she said, "that I am not the thing which you must think me? Geoffrey, I swear by my love for you that I am innocent. If I came--oh, the shame of it! if I came--to your room last night, it was my feet which led me, not my mind that led my feet. I went to sleep, I was worn out, and then I knew no more till I heard a dreadful sound, and saw you before me in a blaze of light, after which there was darkness."

"Oh, Beatrice, do not be distressed," he answered. "I saw that you were asleep. It is a dreadful thing which has happened, but I do not think that we were seen."

"I do not know," she said. "Elizabeth looked at me very strangely this morning, and she sees everything. Geoffrey, for my part, I neither know nor care. What I do care for is, what must you think of me? You must believe, oh!--I cannot say it. And yet I am innocent. Never, never did I dream of this. To come to you--thus--oh, it is shameless!"

"Beatrice, do not talk so. I tell you I know it. Listen--I drew you. I did not mean that you should come. I did not think that you would come, but it was my doing. Listen to me, dear," and he told her that which written words can ill express.

When he had finished, she looked up, with another face; the deep shadow of her shame had left her. "I believe you, Geoffrey," she said, "because I know that you have not invented this to shield me, for I have felt it also. See by it what you are to me. You are my master and my all. I cannot withstand you if I would. I have little will apart from yours if you choose to gainsay mine. And now promise me this upon your word. Leave me uninfluenced; do not draw me to you to be your ruin. I make no pretence, I have laid my life at your feet, but while I have any strength to struggle against it, you shall never take it up unless you can do so to your own honour, and that is not possible. Oh, my dear, we might have been very happy together, happier than men and women often are, but it is denied to us. We must carry our cross, we must crucify the flesh upon it; perhaps so--who can say?--we may glorify the spirit. I owe you a great deal. I have learnt much from you, Geoffrey. I have learned to hope again for a Hereafter. Nothing is left to me now--but that--that and an hour hence--your memory.

"Oh, why should I weep? It is ungrateful, when I have your love, for which this misery is but a little price to pay. Kiss me, dear, and go--and never see me more. You will not forget me, I know now that you

will never forget me all your life. Afterwards--perhaps--who can tell?
If not, why then--it will indeed be best--to die."

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It is not well to linger over such a scene as this. After all, too, it is nothing. Only another broken heart or so. The world breaks so many this way and the other that it can have little pleasure in gloating over such stale scenes of agony.

Besides we must not let our sympathies carry us away. Geoffrey and Beatrice deserved all they got; they had no business to put themselves into such a position. They had defied the customs of their world, and the world avenged itself upon them and their petty passions. What happens to the worm that tries to burrow on the highways? Grinding wheels and crushing feet; these are its portion. Beatrice and Geoffrey point a moral and adorn a tale. So far as we can see and judge there was no need for them to have plunged into that ever-running river of human pain. Let them struggle and drown, and let those who are on the bank learn wisdom from the sight, and hold out no hand to help them.

Geoffrey drew a ring from his finger and gave it to his love. It was a common flat-sided silver ring that had been taken from the grave of a Roman soldier: one peculiarity it had, however; on its inner surface were roughly cut the words, "ave atque vale." Greeting and farewell! It was a fitting gift to pass between people in their position. Beatrice,

trembling sorely, whispered that she would wear it on her heart, upon her hand she could not put it yet awhile--it might be recognised.

Then thrice did they embrace there upon the desolate shore, once, as it were, for past joy, once for present pain, and once for future hope, and parted. There was no talk of after meetings--they felt them to be impossible, at any rate for many years. How could they meet as indifferent friends? Too much they loved for that. It was a final parting, than which death had been less dreadful--for Hope sits ever by the bed of death--and misery crushed them to the earth.

He left her, and happiness went out of his life as at nightfall the daylight goes out of the day. Well, at least he had his work to go to. But Beatrice, poor woman, what had she?

Geoffrey left her. When he had gone some thirty paces he turned again and gazed his last upon her. There she stood or rather leant, her hand resting against the wet rock, looking after him with her wide grey eyes. Even through the drizzling rain he could see the gleam of her rich hair, the marking of her lovely face, and the carmine of her lips. She motioned to him to go on. He went, and when he had traversed a hundred paces looked round once more. She was still there, but now her face was a blur, and again the great white gull hovered about her head.

Then the mist swept up and hid her.

Ah, Beatrice, with all your brains you could never learn those simple principles necessary to the happiness of woman; principles inherited through a thousand generations of savage and semi-civilized ancestresses. To accept the situation and the master that situation brings with it--this is the golden rule of well-being. Not to put out the hand of your affection further than you can draw it back, this is another, at least not until you are quite sure that its object is well within your grasp. If by misfortune, or the anger of the Fates, you are endowed with those deeper qualities, those extreme capacities of self-sacrificing affection, such as ruined your happiness, Beatrice, keep them in stock; do not expose them to the world. The world does not believe in them; they are inconvenient and undesirable; they are even immoral. What the world wants, and very rightly, in a person of your attractiveness is quiet domesticity of character, not the exhibition of attributes which though they might qualify you for the rank of heroine in a Greek drama, are nowadays only likely to qualify you for the reprobation of society.

What? you would rather keep your love, your reprehensible love which never can be satisfied, and bear its slings and arrows, and die hugging a shadow to your heart, straining your eyes into the darkness of that beyond whither you shall go--murmuring with your pale lips that there

you will find reason and fulfilment? Why it is folly. What ground have you to suppose that you will find anything of the sort? Go and take the opinion of some scientific person of eminence upon this infatuation of yours and those vague visions of glory that shall be. He will explain it clearly enough, will show you that your love itself is nothing but a natural passion, acting, in your case, on a singularly sensitive and etherealised organism. Be frank with him, tell him of your secret hopes. He will smile tenderly, and show you how those also are an emanation from a craving heart, and the innate superstitions of mankind. Indeed he will laugh and illustrate the absurdity of the whole thing by a few pungent examples of what would happen if these earthly affections could be carried beyond the grave. Take what you can now will be the burden of his song, and for goodness' sake do not waste your precious hours in dreams of a To Be.

Beatrice, the world does not want your spirituality. It is not a spiritual world; it has no clear ideas upon the subject--it pays its religious premium and works off its aspirations at its weekly church going, and would think the person a fool who attempted to carry theories of celestial union into an earthly rule of life. It can sympathise with Lady Honoria; it can hardly sympathise with you.

And yet you will still choose this better part: you will still "live and love, and lose."

"With blinding tears and passionate beseeching, And outstretched arms

through empty silence reaching."

Then, Beatrice, have your will, sow your seed of tears, and take your chance. You may find that you were right and the worldlings wrong, and you may reap a harvest beyond the grasp of their poor imaginations. And if you find that they are right and you are wrong, what will it matter to you who sleep? For of this at least you are sure. If there is no future for such earthly love as yours, then indeed there is none for the children of this world and all their troubling.